

HEREFORD CATHEDRAL'S MEDIIEVAL WORLD MAP

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The Hereford *mappa mundi* is the largest known map of its sort to survive from the Middle Ages.

Hereford Cathedral is notable for a number of things, amongst them its world-famous Chained Library and the triennial Three Choirs Festival, but perhaps the cathedral's most famous treasure is its medieval *mappa mundi*. This fascinating map, showing a Western Christian perception of the inhabited world in the Middle Ages, was added to the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in 2007 and is now displayed in a purpose-built exhibition at the cathedral. The map describes a world where the cities of Christendom stand next to the wonders of Classical Antiquity, and where strange beasts and deformed races dwell in far-away lands. This is a place inhabited by dragons, unicorns and giants, but it is also a realm whose pivotal focus is the crucifixion. A circular diagram depicting Jerusalem marks both the geographic and figurative centre of the map, and above Jerusalem an image of Christ crucified rises like a cross on an orb. Today the map is faded, yellowing, and in places indistinct, but in its own time, newly drawn and vibrant with colour, it would almost certainly have seemed to its medieval viewers to be a truly stunning representation of the world's geography, ethnography and history. But as well as this, and importantly, it showed the spiritual destination of humanity.

Three Events Record the Significance of the Map's Legendary Origins and Medieval Christian Message



The three geographers receive a sealed directive.

Made c.1300, the *mappa mundi* is drawn onto a single sheet of vellum (calf skin) measuring 1.59 x 1.34 metres (5'2" by 4'4"). The circle of the world is described within a pentagonal shape that echoes the shape of the calf-skin it is drawn on, the apex of the whole artefact being the head end. In the spaces between the circular outline of the world and the edge of the pentagonal vellum (the top and two bottom corners), there are drawings of three events that record the significance of the map's legendary origins as well as its medieval Christian message. In the bottom left-hand corner

three geographers are given an imperial and theological imperative to go forth and survey the world and all its contents. Caesar Augustus, crowned with a papal tiara that calls to mind the *Donation of Constantine*,¹ hands them a sealed directive, while a text from the Gospel of St Luke reinforces the religious imperative of their mission. On the opposite side of the vellum, in the bottom right-hand corner, a figure on horseback gazes over his shoulder as he rides away from the rim of the world. A huntsman bids him, in Anglo-Norman, to 'passe avant', 'go beyond'.

¹ The *Donation of Constantine* is the best-known forgery of the Middle Ages. It purports to record the bestowal of territory and power on Pope Sylvester (314 – 336) and his successors. Composed in the 8th century, it influenced political and religious affairs in medieval Europe until proved a forgery in the 15th century.



The Day of Judgement or Doomsday.

The Image of Doomsday Dominates the Circle of the World

Outside of the world's circumference are four gilded capitals that spell out *M O R S* (Latin, 'death'), and in the space at the top of the map is a typical medieval doomsday scene. Christ, enthroned, displays the wounds of crucifixion, while at his feet Mary intercedes for the souls of humanity. To his right an orderly queue of the redeemed are admitted through the gates of heaven, and on his left the damned, stripped of all worldly possessions, are chained together and led by a demon towards the mouth of hell. As in many medieval doom paintings, the mouth of hell is shown as the gaping jaws of a dragon-like creature. In a medieval church, a doom painting on the archway between the nave and the chancel marked the boundary between the congregation and the most sacred part of the church. It stood at the threshold between the profane and the holy, the worldly and the spiritual. In a similar way, the doomsday image of the Hereford map must have provided a graphic reminder to its medieval viewers of the judgement that stands between this world and the heavenly kingdom.

Layout of the Map

Within the circle of the world the pattern of seas and continents is at first confusing. In a convention followed by many Western Christian world maps of the time, East is at the top, and three continents, Asia, Europe and Africa, occupy the whole of the map's circle. Asia spreads out across the top half of the map, Europe covers roughly the

bottom left-hand quarter, and Africa occupies the bottom right-hand quarter. The Mediterranean Sea, home to a mermaid and many different shapes and sizes of fish, reaches inwards from the bottom of the map towards the centre. The world's ocean circles the outer edges of the continents and is full of peripheral islands, of which the largest by a long way are the British Isles.



The British Isles.



The original medieval shrine of St Thomas Cantilupe survives in the North Transept of the cathedral, and in 2008 iconographer Peter Murphy designed a shrine panel and canopy featuring the *mappa mundi*. Today, pilgrimage and the *mappa mundi* still play an important part in the life of Hereford Cathedral.

Hereford as a Place of Pilgrimage

Looking strangely disfigured, the British Isles are squashed between the continental land mass and the outer rim of the world. Castles of Edward I mark out the political landscape of the time, and places of importance like London, Lincoln and York are drawn in detail. Hereford itself, however, looks rather small and insignificant in comparison, yet the fact that Hereford is there at all is important. In 1999 the writing surface and handwriting was examined closely by Malcolm Parkes, who suggested that Hereford had not originally been included on the map, and that the scribe had needed to scrape off the original lettering marking the River Severn, to make a space into which Hereford and the river Wye could be fitted.² The map would initially have been copied from an exemplar, which might not have included Hereford. It is easy to speculate that the scribe's changes were in order to customise the map to please those who had commissioned it, and it is not difficult to argue that there would have been good reason for the bishop of the time, Richard Swinfield, to insist on Hereford's inclusion. In

c.1307, a date that coincides with the upper extreme of the date range identified for the map's construction, Swinfield succeeded in initiating a canonisation hearing for his predecessor, Thomas Cantilupe. Anticipating the success of this hearing, he embarked upon an ambitious project to transform Hereford Cathedral into a place of pilgrimage. The bones of Cantilupe were to be translated to a new shrine in the Lady Chapel, and routes to and from the shrine were furnished with a line of effigies of past bishops designed to suggest a prestigious episcopal heritage. Although there is no documentary evidence to prove that Swinfield intended the *mappa mundi* to play a part in this scheme, it is easy to see how such an impressive map of the world might have been an intriguing extra inducement to pilgrims to visit Hereford. Moreover, as well as attracting the curious, it would have provided a demonstration of the cathedral's status as a place of scholarship and learning. If Swinfield's ambitions were to be realised, and the cathedral was to be recognised as an important destination for pilgrims, then Hereford would most certainly need to take its place on the map of the world.

² Malcolm Parkes, 'The Hereford Map: the handwriting and copying of the text' in *The Hereford World Map: Medieval World Maps and their Context*. Ed P.D.A. Harvey (British Library, 2006).

Crete with its Labyrinth

Across the sea from Britain, the continents are crowded with texts and pictures. Drawings of Biblical stories, Classical mythology, beasts and peculiar humanoids are scattered amongst architectural devices representing buildings, towns and cities. To the modern eye many of the map's descriptions and images might at first seem naïve, and possibly reinforce a perception of the Middle Ages as an era of ignorance and credulity. But it is perhaps misleading to judge the map by today's standards and expectations. The medieval world view was based upon very different assumptions from today's scientific analysis. Western Christians of the Middle Ages sought to understand the world and everything in it as evidence of God's divine plan for the destiny of humanity. In order to try to understand the map from this perspective, it is helpful to look at other manuscripts that were influential at the time, like bestiaries, for example, or the encyclopaedic writings of Isidore of Seville, or the Bible itself. To this end, the following collection of examples from the map is looked at in the light of writings of the sort that would almost certainly have been known to an educated medieval community.



The Terrestrial Paradise

The Garden of Eden is at the top of the map, in the extreme East. But although Eden is certainly 'on the map', so to speak, the lesson of the image is unequivocal. Because of Adam and Eve's disobedience, Eden is inaccessible to humanity. It is surrounded by a ring of fire and crenelated walls, the gates are firmly shut and the whole paradise is separated from the landmasses by water. Beneath Eden, on the eastern-most shore of the world, an angel with a sword expels Adam and Eve. Their heads are bowed, their shoulders seem burdened, and they wring their hands in despair. They are wretched; crushed with the weight of an act of disobedience that will condemn all of humanity to live in a world of sin. The doctrine of original sin, as developed in the work of Saint Augustine of Hippo, was widely disseminated, and to a medieval audience the implications of the map's representation of the Fall would have been unmistakable.³



Elephant

Near the coast of India, and not far from the earthly paradise, is an elephant. Weighted down by the battle-tower he carries on his back, he droops his head towards the ground and his expression is one of forbearance. The brief text on the map makes no mention of the long and moralising lessons found in many bestiaries, but the picture of the elephant alone would very likely have reminded medieval viewers of descriptions they may have read for themselves in a bestiary, or perhaps heard about in sermons and homilies. The writer of the Aberdeen Bestiary, for instance, narrates at length how elephants are monogamous and travel to the east, near paradise, to mate. Here, the female seduces the male with the fruit of the mandrake. Two years later she gives birth in water to protect the calf from the dragon, which is the enemy of the elephant. The explanation given is that elephants represent Adam and Eve, who were innocent until Eve tempted Adam with the fruit of the tree of knowledge. After the temptation, Eve conceived and gave birth on the waters of guilt.⁴



³ See Saint Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, edited and translated by R. W. Dyson (Cambridge University Press, 1998), especially book XIII.

⁴ Aberdeen Bestiary, Aberdeen University Library, Univ. Lib. MS24. Also available at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary>.

Unicorn (*Monoceros*)

Unicorns were often included in bestiaries alongside real beasts. The map's unicorn, or *monoceros*, is easily recognised by his candy-cane twisted horn, and is drawn beneath a block of text giving detailed information. It reads:

According to Isidore ... a virgin girl is brought before this *monoceros*, and on his approach she bares her breast, on which he rests his head – all ferocity abandoned – so that, stupefied, he is captured like a harmless creature.

In his *Etymologiae*, Isidore of Seville explains that the behaviour of the *monoceros* should be read as an allegory for the life of Christ, who was made incarnate in a virgin's womb, and became man.⁵



Blemmyes

Blemmyes are common in medieval literature and art. They are headless humanoids with mouths and eyes in their chest. The map's Blemmye stands at the southern edge of the world holding a spear in his left hand and a shield in his right. One manuscript, a version of Thomas de Cantimpré's *Liber de Naturis Rerum*, written c.1290, is particularly memorable for its moral comment. The writer compares the physical disfigurement of the Blemmye to moral depravity, and then goes on to say:

...Are there any people like this in our own land?

Yes, and you need not search further for them. What are they? Why they are lawyers ... who have their mouths in their bellies...⁶

Perhaps the people of the Middle Ages were not so very different from ourselves!



Dog-heads

Two dog-headed creatures (*cynocephali*) sit facing each other on a promontory to the north of Europe. Their heads are tilted slightly back and their mouths are open as though in animated conversation. They each wield an axe in one hand, while with the other they point, a gesture that in medieval art often signifies speech. There is nothing in the written text on the map to indicate what their conversation might be about, but perhaps a clue is to be found in a bestiary known as the Douce Bestiary, where their barking voices are said to represent 'detractors and fomentors of discord'.⁷ The writer of another text, the *Gesta Romanorum*, also takes a moral stance. For him, *cynocephali* represent preachers who 'ought to be clad in animal skins, that is, in bitter penance for their untruths and vices, and held up as an example to everyday folk'.⁸



⁵ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, translated with an introduction and notes by Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach and Oliver Bergof (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁶ Clerk of Enghein, *La manière et les faictures des monstres des hommes qui sont en Orient et le plus en Inde. Bibliothèque nationale de France, français, 15106 (N)*. See John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Syracuse University Press, 2000).

⁷ Bodleian Library, MS Douce 88. Illustrations are also available at <http://bodley30.bodley.ox.ac.uk/>

⁸ The *Gesta Romanorum* exists in a number of manuscripts. There is a new English translation: *Gesta Romanorum*, a new translation by Christopher Stace (Manchester University Press, 2016).

Santiago de Compostela

In the Middle Ages the shrine of Saint James at Compostela had become an important pilgrimage site. Pilgrimage at that time was a dangerous venture, with pilgrims having to negotiate inhospitable landscapes, foreign customs and perhaps local hostility. The guidance of previous travellers would have been hugely important and there is evidence that books were written with the intention of fulfilling exactly that purpose. A very detailed twelfth-century guide book is still kept in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. It gives extensive travel information for pilgrims, including the route to take, the costs involved, local dialects, details about where the best wines, meat and fish are to be found, and even advice that Tiermas in Spain has hot springs – as it still does today!⁹



The Columns of Hercules

At the very bottom of the map, at the Strait of Gibraltar, two columns mark the limit of the Mediterranean Sea. These mythical pillars were thought to stand at the edge of the inhabited world with, as reported by Dante Alighieri in his *Inferno* (c.1300), 'nothing further beyond'. On the map, a text written in red just inland from the shores of Iberia, and to the left of the columns, reads *Terminus Europe*, 'the end of Europe', and on the opposite side of the columns, in North Africa, a similar text reads, *Terminus Africe*, 'The end of Africa'.¹⁰



Conclusion

The Hereford *mappa mundi*, then, is very much a document of its own time. From the birthplace of humanity in the Garden of Eden, to the Columns of Hercules at end of the inhabited world, it displays an intriguing and eclectic collection of images and texts that record a world view very different from our own. It is, certainly, an extraordinary survival of Hereford Cathedral's medieval past, and one that can offer huge insights into the world of the Middle Ages.

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⁹ The pilgrimage guide is book five of the *Codex Calixtinus* housed in the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela. An English version can be found at <http://www.codexcalixtinusfacsimil.com/2012/07/the-english-version-of-book-v-codex.html>

¹⁰ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* from *The Divine Comedy*. There are many editions.